

Extraordinarily Resilient

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Summary: A bout of separation anxiety leads Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to contemplate bonds that can't be broken--whether they like it or not. Q/O slash.

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> "Confer on you the level of Jedi Knight we do, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Qui-Gon Jinn allowed himself a moment of unmitigated pride as he watched his apprentice--almost his former apprentice--kneeling before Master Yoda and the assembled Jedi Council, head bowed humbly. Obi-Wan had no choice but to be humble in his new Knighthood, serene and self-abnegating, the perfect Jedi at his trial. His Master, however, had the freedom to revel in the satisfaction of finally seeing his Padawan honored by the Council. He had earned it. They both had.

Yoda glanced at him with amusement, then motioned him forward, and Qui-Gon's elation faded somewhat. He had anticipated this moment with equal delight and dread, the moment when he would sever the ties that bound Obi-Wan to him as a student and greet him as an equal. As glad as he was to see the culmination of all the years of Obi-Wan's hard training, especially considering how close Qui-Gon had come to never seeing this day at all, he still felt a pervasive sadness at the thought of ending their training bond and giving up the closeness they had shared for so long.

But it had to be done. Obi-Wan no longer needed him, and down in the initiates' quarters, Anakin awaited his new Master. Replacing one training bond with another so quickly was hardly orthodox, but little about the last few weeks could be called orthodox. Qui-Gon had meditated on the coming change for hours, preparing himself to break the link as cleanly and gently as possible, although he knew nothing could make it easy for either of them. They should have had more time, but there was no more time to be had.

He stepped forward to where Obi-Wan still knelt. His student's lightsaber tapped against Qui-Gon's thigh from its unaccustomed place on his belt; Obi-Wan had given it over to him before the trials began, with the understanding that he would receive it back as a full Jedi Knight, or not at all. Obi-Wan looked up at him and smiled, meeting his eyes for the first time since the trials. "You have done well, my Padawan," Qui-Gon murmured as he knelt down facing Obi-Wan. He savored the words, knowing this was the last time he would address Obi-Wan so.

"Thank you, Master," Obi-Wan said softly. "For everything."

"It has been my honor and my pleasure." He could not resist a last brush across their training bond, letting Obi-Wan feel his pride and affection. Obi-Wan smiled again and returned the gentle touch with his own love and gratitude, even as Yoda made his halting way around to stand beside them.

The elder Master held out a small, much-used but razor-sharp knife. "This Padawan you have trained, Master Qui-Gon Jinn. Accept him now as a Knight, do you?"

His final opportunity, as Obi-Wan's Master, to voice any compelling doubts he might harbor about the young man's fitness to become a Jedi. His gaze never wavered from Obi-Wan's as he reached up to take the knife from Yoda. "I accept him with full confidence in his worthiness. The Force is with him."

Yoda nodded and took a few paces back as Qui-Gon closed his eyes to gather himself. When he opened them again, Obi-Wan still looked steadily at him, the picture of serenity. Only the faintest tinge of sadness through their link gave lie to the image, a last telling trickle through the bond. And soon, there would be nothing at all.

He lifted one hand to take the braid, sliding it through his fingers before grasping it firmly, close to Obi-Wan's head. Obi-Wan closed his eyes, perfectly submissive to his Master for the last time as Qui-Gon raised the knife to just above Obi-Wan's ear, poised to sever the hair at the same moment he severed the ties of apprenticeship between them. "Force be with you," Qui-Gon whispered and stroked the blade smoothly along the side of Obi-Wan's head, feeling the braid come free in his hand. At the same time, he reached carefully into Obi-Wan's mind with the Force, found the anchor of their training bond and sliced cleanly through it, bracing himself for the inevitable feeling of loss.

Nothing happened.

Frowning slightly, he poked cautiously at the link. Impossibly, it

was still there. He focused again, then repeated the action.

Obi-Wan's brow wrinkled over his closed eyes. *Is that it?*

Hush! He did not need the boy complicating matters by using the bond even as he was trying his best to break it. He quickly reviewed everything he knew about the procedure, everything he had done before, then braced for a third try. The bond did not budge. Again he tried, and again failed, then another time and another after that, until he felt like the bond was even more firmly anchored than it had been when he began. *Let go,* he told Obi-Wan urgently, knowing the Council were beginning to stir curiously.

I'm not doing anything!

"A problem, you have?" Yoda's mild inquiry broke into their mental argument, and Qui-Gon sat back on his heels, aware that he was beginning to sweat from his mental efforts. "It would seem, my Master," he said, trying to hide his embarrassment, "that the dissolution of my training bond with Obi-Wan is not progressing as smoothly as I had anticipated it would."

"You can't break it?" Ki-Adi-Mundi's voice held a note of astonishment and ridicule, and Qui-Gon tamped down his annoyance. Of course the training and raising of a Padawan probably seemed all very simple to Mundi, seeing as the man had never actually done it himself.

Yoda sighed heavily and leaned on his stick. "Assistance, you require?"

Qui-Gon hesitated. He wanted to protest that he could handle it himself, but having already failed so decisively and so many times, he could hardly make a convincing argument for yet another attempt. And then he looked at Obi-Wan. The younger man looked pale and shaken, and he cast a pleading glance at Qui-Gon. He sighed internally. Whatever illusions Obi-Wan might still have harbored of his Master's infallibility, they were well and truly shattered now. Already wearied from his trials, he did not need any further ordeals in the name of salvaging Qui-Gon's injured pride. "Yes, my Master," he said reluctantly at last, trying not to take offense at Obi-Wan's expression of profound relief. "We would be grateful."

A short nod from Yoda brought Mace Windu to his feet with ill-concealed annoyance. "For pity's sake, Qui-Gon," he muttered as he moved to stand on the other side of them. "That you managed to train the boy at all is a miracle."

"Just get it over with," Qui-Gon muttered. Obi-Wan visibly braced himself as Windu held a hand over each of their heads and pulled the Force in around him. Qui-Gon saw it in his mind's eye as a fiercely glowing saber blade which paused, poised over them. He had just enough time to realize that Windu intended to destroy the bond with brute power, and that such a tactic was likely to cause significant pain, before the Force-born blade arced down between him and Obi-Wan.

Pain was too mild a description for the shock that reverberated through him, searing into every synapse, blinding him to everything

outside his own head. When it eased enough for him to focus again, he saw Windu a few paces further away than he had been before, doubled over and panting. Obi-Wan was panting, too, and staring at Qui-Gon questioningly.

A moment later, the thoughts touched him as they should not have been able to. *Master?*

Qui-Gon could only stare back in dismay.

"A problem we have," Yoda said.

* * *

> <p> They walked back to their quarters in silence. Qui-Gon's head pounded with every step, and he did not need to look over at his companion to know that Obi-Wan's expression matched his own: aching, embarrassed and frustrated. <p>

Three excruciatingly long hours passed in the Council chamber. Each member of the Council had taken a turn wrenching and hacking at the recalcitrant link; then they joined as a mass and in smaller groups to discuss and implement strategies of varying subtlety. Yoda had even led the pair in a guided meditation intended to coax the bond free, the more violent methods having failed spectacularly. But even that accomplished nothing, even before Obi-Wan fell asleep from sheer exhaustion in the midst of the trance.

At last Yoda called a stop, looking almost as pained as Qui-Gon felt. All the efforts of the most powerful living Jedi Masters had made no impression on the bond. It endured everything they bombarded it with and slipped from their grasp at every attempt to remove it.

"Extraordinarily resilient," Yoda had muttered to himself over and over. "Extraordinarily resilient." Just as Qui-Gon thought his sanity might snap before the bond did, Yoda sent them home with instructions to rest and meditate while the Council debated what to do next.

Rest, preferably with the covers pulled up over his head to hide from whatever it was in the universe that had it in for him, seemed a deeply appealing option to Qui-Gon as the door to their quarters slid open at their approach. Yet even as Obi-Wan threw himself down, scowling, to sprawl across the couch, Qui-Gon found himself too agitated to seek the peace of his own sleeping room. Instead, he paced from one end of their living space to the other, examining and straightening the sparse contents of the room, although almost nothing had been touched since before they left for Naboo. The tension in the room grew until a mutter from Obi-Wan broke the silence.

Qui-Gon turned sharply. "What did you say?"

Obi-Wan looked at him with cool aplomb, save for the flash of heat deep in his eyes. "Typical. This is so typical."

"And what does that mean, precisely?"

Despite Qui-Gon's sternest look, Obi-Wan did not flinch. "It means that apparently asking for everything to go smoothly, just this once, on the second most important day of my life, is too much to ask. You

can't just break the bond like every other Jedi Master for the last thousand generations. No, you have to be different."

The flash of hurt--Obi-Wan seemed eager enough to get rid of him--made Qui-Gon snap more sharply than he had meant to. "I handled two training bonds before you ever came along, and they both ended with great finality, I'll have you know."

Obi-Wan bit his lip and looked away, and Qui-Gon subsided, abruptly grateful that Obi-Wan had not chosen to pursue the subject of previous apprentices. The bonds had ended, certainly, but any proclamation of great success in them would not hold up to the determined scrutiny he knew Obi-Wan was capable of giving the matter--and probably already had. Qui-Gon's teaching history was no secret, especially not from his current, naturally inquisitive student.

He sat heavily on the couch next to Obi-Wan, and they sat together in silence, too wound up for sleep, too tired for meditation. A wide sunbeam moved across the floor as Qui-Gon tried to nudge his thoughts in the proper direction, to align with the will of the Force as he had perceived it. He had finished training Obi-Wan; now, he needed to train Anakin. It should have been no more complicated than that. And yet, here they sat, at an impasse.

Obi-Wan's voice summoned him back softly from the inner world of his thoughts. "If we can't figure out how to break this, then what?"

"We will. The Force will guide us." His stock answer to everything, and Obi-Wan knew it, but he had nothing else to offer. Such an unusual event could only come about through the Force, whether or not they understood its will. He did his best to live in compliance with that will, and had taught Obi-Wan to do the same, regardless of their own wishes or expectations.

And a fine job it's done so far. Obi-Wan looked at him darkly, daring him to rebuke the unspoken blasphemy he should not have been able to hear. Qui-Gon held his peace until Obi-Wan continued aloud. "And what if it doesn't? What if it isn't guiding us the way you want it to go?"

"It will." Qui-Gon narrowed his eyes menacingly. Obi-Wan always made things more difficult than they needed to be. It was one of his less charming personality traits, as was the fact that he seemed unimpressed by Qui-Gon's annoyance. "It is necessary."

"Why?"

He stared at Obi-Wan in surprise. Obi-Wan's jaw was set stubbornly, but his eyes were as wistful as they were defiant as he met Qui-Gon's gaze evenly. "What do you mean, why?"

"Why? Why does it matter?" Obi-Wan gave a tiny shrug with a hesitant smile. "I know the training bond is no longer necessary, but why does it matter so much that it be dissolved immediately?"

At least Obi-Wan no longer seemed so frantic to be rid of him. A small comfort, although trust Obi-Wan to choose these circumstances to express his attachment. He had never heard of such an attachment

causing a training bond to become unbreakable, but he would not be surprised if Obi-Wan were the one to manage it. "No one can have more than one training bond at a time. It is simply not possible. The Code forbids having more than one apprentice or Master for exactly that reason."

"I am well aware of that," Obi-Wan replied with a patience that strayed too near condescension for the comfort of Qui-Gon's edgy nerves. "What I'm asking is why you're so upset about it."

"Because," Qui-Gon said as evenly as he could. Barely a hint of his mental snarl manifested in his tone, and he congratulated himself. "Until our bond dissolves, I cannot take another Padawan learner, and neither can you."

A casual shrug of his shoulders suggested nonchalance, but something lurked in the back of Obi-Wan's eyes that gave Qui-Gon pause. "I'm not in a hurry." Lips thinned with repressed pain twitched upwards. "After all, I know exactly how many of your gray hairs I'm responsible for. I confess I don't understand why you're so eager to repeat the experience yet again."

"You know exactly why." The words came out harsher than he had intended, and he imagined he could feel yet another gray hair sprouting as he spoke. "Do you think I'm truly eager for another apprentice at my age? I have to train Ani. No one else will."

The next instant he knew he had said the worst thing possible under the circumstances. Obi-Wan's eyes widened as though Qui-Gon had struck him on the head, then narrowed into icy chips. "I see," he said. "Just like me."

"Obi-Wan--" he started, horrified, but Obi-Wan was already up and moving across the room before Qui-Gon could catch him.

"Maybe Anakin is better off this way." Obi-Wan's voice held more sadness than anger, and Qui-Gon moved toward him on instinct. "Better he find out now."

The door to Obi-Wan's room snapped shut just as Qui-Gon reached it. He palmed at the release, but it did not budge. He stared at it, baffled. Obi-Wan had never, in all the years of his apprenticeship, locked his door against his Master. "Obi-Wan!" He pounded his hand on the door frame in frustration. "Padawan, out here now!"

The door remained stubbornly shut, and the silence from behind it hung tauntingly around him. Slowly, Qui-Gon realized his second mistake. He had called for his Padawan, but he had no further claim on Obi-Wan's obedience as his Master, and Obi-Wan was making that point clear to him. "Fine," he called into the silence. "Remain there and sulk, if that's what you wish to do."

Before Obi-Wan could continue to pointedly follow that directive, Qui-Gon turned on his heel and retreated into his own room to do the same.

* * *

> <p> The insistent buzzing of the com-panel woke him from the

exhausted sleep in which he had indulged when meditation had proved almost as exasperating an exercise as talking to Obi-Wan. He rubbed at his eyes to get them to stay open, then swung his legs over the side of the sleep couch, pleased when they carried him without protest the few steps to the panel. <p>

Yoda, when his transparent blue image finally appeared at the touch of a button, looked considerably less pleased. Qui-Gon's brief bow went unacknowledged as the narrowed eyes examined him closely. "Not yet recovered from Naboo are you," Yoda said at last. "I should have seen this sooner."

"I am fully recovered from the injuries I sustained on Naboo, Master." He would, in fact, have preferred to forget that accursed planet entirely, were it possible to do so.

"You are not." Yoda's tone brooked no further argument. "Not in touch with the Force and yourself you are. Not as you should be. Extraordinarily resilient your bond has proved to be, and extraordinarily resilient you are, but still only human."

"Perhaps you are right, my Master." Qui-Gon had cheated death on Naboo, and while he did not fear death, such an experience was food for many hours of meditation, hours he had not been able to give himself between caring for Anakin and preparing Obi-Wan for his trials. But the reality of his experience loomed in his mind. The Force had claimed him, and Obi-Wan had brought him back.

A thought struck him at that, but Yoda lifted a hand with a sigh before Qui-Gon could do more than draw the breath to speak. "Enough of your theories have I heard for one week, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"But, Master," Qui-Gon persisted. "If Obi-Wan somehow deepened or cemented the bond while healing me through it on Naboo, it could explain the difficulty."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not. If so, permanent the problem likely is." Although he did not seem impressed by Qui-Gon's theory, Yoda seemed resigned to the prospect of insolubility, and Qui-Gon frowned.

"But what of Anakin?"

The elder Master sighed again. "In one thing, you were correct. Training the boy must have, or more dangerous he will become. Wait for you, young Skywalker cannot. I will begin his training myself."

He knew he was staring, dumbfounded. The Council did not reverse its decisions often, and Yoda had been one of the most leery of admitting Anakin to their order. "You will train Anakin?"

"Told you that already, I did." The snappish tone made Yoda's displeasure with the entire situation clear. "I have seen further."

"What have you seen, my Master?" Qui-Gon leaned forward, intrigued by whatever could have compelled Yoda to so drastically alter his course of action, but the other Master waved him off.

"Your concern it no longer is," Yoda said firmly. "Concern yourself

now with your own Padawan."

"I no longer have a Padawan." It was not the first time in his life, nor even the second, that he had spoken those words, but they felt as strange and untrue in his mouth as they ever had. Perhaps more so now. "Obi-Wan is a Knight, now."

"He is a Knight, yes." Yoda nodded and thumped his walking stick in front of him. "But bound to you he is still, and the cause of that is within you to discover. Further time to play counselor, I do not have. May the Force be with you."

Qui-Gon barely had time for a short bow of acknowledgment before Yoda's image blinked out. Still somewhat disoriented, he took the few steps back to his sleep couch and sat heavily, calming his thoughts into rational order only with great effort.

The Council had taken responsibility for Anakin's care from him. The Chosen One--for after Naboo he was more certain than ever that Anakin was indeed the Chosen One--was no longer his charge. As a Jedi, he did not expect to feel any injured pride or undue grief over the prospect. He did not expect to feel much at all, save happiness that Anakin would after all be accepted as a Jedi, or perhaps a faint regret at having lost the chance to teach an exceptionally bright and spirited boy. He did not expect the rush of overwhelming relief that filled him and spilled over into a strange and quiet joy.

Bowing his head and closing his eyes, he prepared to trace the source and meaning of the unorthodox emotional welling. For a time, all that would come to him were vague, fretful thoughts of Obi-Wan that he could not pin down long enough to gain any enlightenment. He was too tired for this; Naboo had sapped more from him than he would admit to anyone.

He was too old, as well, too old to be chasing his subconscious around his skull like a churba cub chasing a moth. Certainly he was too old to be clinging to his newly-knighted apprentice as though he needed Obi-Wan to cut his food for him. A good thing, then, that he was not to train Anakin. At this rate, he would be such a mewling, pathetic mess by the time the boy attained his knighthood that they would have to lock him away for his own safety.

Old he was, but not that old. Yet the Force seemed to tell him clearly: he still needed Obi-Wan. Still wanted him.

Wanted him. Oh, yes. That knowledge was old as well, put aside long ago with the awareness that no matter how much he wanted Obi-Wan, he could not have him. It was the way of the Force that a Master would train his Padawan, care for him, and then let him go to serve the Force on his own. A Master could love his Padawan, but not possess him, not keep him. Qui-Gon had long since made his peace with that reality, and had focused on guiding Obi-Wan into his full potential as a Jedi, without thought for his own desires.

And yet, here they were. The cold, horrible realization began to rise within him that his earlier, self-pitying thoughts had been closer to the truth than he wanted to believe. Obi-Wan was not the one who could not let go, who had cemented them together so that not even the Council could break them apart. He had done it himself, without even the excuse of youthful attachments or insecurities, failing

inexcusably in the final duty he owed to his Padawan.

Someone was tapping on his door, interrupting his fall into dismay. From the increasing urgency of the sound, they--Obi-Wan, for who else could it be?--had been tapping for some time. Testing cautiously, he found to his relief that although he could feel Obi-Wan's presence and concern through the Force, the bond had at last receded to its normal level of intensity. Obi-Wan would have felt nothing of his realization. "Yes, Obi-Wan," he called.

By the time the door opened, Qui-Gon had composed himself again, although the dubious look Obi-Wan gave him made him suspect his outward appearance was not as serene as he might have hoped. Obi-Wan leaned against the doorjamb and regarded him for a moment, then straightened up and drew a determined breath. "Qui-Gon, I wish to offer my apologies for what I--"

"No, Obi-Wan." He waved a hand to stop Obi-Wan's words. "No more apologies from you. We have both said things we should not have. Perhaps we should begin this new phase of our lives with a clear slate between us."

Obi-Wan remained still for a moment, then slowly nodded and relaxed. "This new phase--as new as it can be, considering the circumstances--is what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Now?" The word came out spontaneously, and he could not tell if it sounded pathetic or combative. From the smile Obi-Wan quickly subdued, he suspected the former.

"No, not now." Obi-Wan leaned back against the jamb and regarded him solemnly. "I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me tonight."

"Dinner? We've eaten together almost every night for the last twelve years." He had not even contemplated that tonight would be any different. But Obi-Wan was a Knight and could dine where he chose--perhaps the point he was trying to make to his former Master.

Or perhaps not, if the slight smirk on Obi-Wan's face was an indication. "No, I'm asking if you would like to have dinner with me tonight." Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows as though daring Qui-Gon to refuse his boldness.

Resilient, Yoda had called him, but Obi-Wan seemed to fit the description far more than Qui-Gon. At least Obi-Wan was not leaving immediately. His spirits rose at the thought, despite the likelihood of problems later. "I would be very pleased to have dinner with you tonight. And where will we be dining?"

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows, then tilted his head thoughtfully, and Qui-Gon could not help but wonder if Obi-Wan had actually gotten past the invitation itself in his planning. The young man had certainly had other things on his mind today. He himself had taught Obi-Wan that one did not prepare for the victory celebration before one had achieved the victory.

"A lesson I remain mindful of at this moment more than any, my Master." Obi-Wan's voice was arch, and with a start Qui-Gon realized

his shields had slipped again. He reinforced them hastily, with some embarrassment. Although he had felt the warmth behind the comment, the words told a blunt truth. How could Obi-Wan celebrate his newly-won title of independence when he remained bound in reality?

"As you should, Obi-Wan," he managed to reply calmly. "But there is no harm in celebrating what you have already accomplished. And you still haven't told me where you wish to dine."

Obi-Wan folded his hands into the sleeves of his robe and lifted his chin in a gesture he had learned from Qui-Gon, then adapted to his own youthful confidence. Some people had found it impressive, some even intimidating, but to Qui-Gon it had always been endearing, and never more appealing than now. "I thought perhaps you might join me at the kitchen table."

He raised his eyebrows, but couldn't suppress a quirk of a smile. "An unusual choice for one's Knighting Day."

"I don't think so. I hear it comes highly recommended." Obi-Wan's expression remained perfectly mild. "I'll take care of the arrangements."

Qui-Gon nodded his agreement and sat back on his sleep couch. Even this small, not unpleasant contact with his Padawan drained his reserves, leaving him longing for rest and meditation. "Whatever you wish. It is your night."

"I know," Obi-Wan responded.

Qui-Gon started to close his eyes, relieved that the conversation seemed over, but Obi-Wan made no move to leave. He stood calmly, as though waiting for Qui-Gon to return his attention to him, as he often had as an apprentice. Qui-Gon found himself irked as much by the deference as by the extension of the encounter. "Yes?" he said, pleased that his testiness did not reach his voice. Obi-Wan did not deserve to have this day ruined anymore than it already had been.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat, then his gaze dropped significantly to Qui-Gon's waist. Confused, Qui-Gon stared back at him, waiting until he forced Obi-Wan to verbalize whatever it was he was trying to communicate. "My lightsaber," Obi-Wan said at last, nodding again to Qui-Gon's waist. "May I have it back? I did, after all, pass the trials."

Qui-Gon's chin jerked downward as his gaze sought his belt and the pair of lightsabers that still hung there. He had gotten so used to the extra weight that he had not noticed it after a while. "Of course," he said, rising again and fumbling at the hilts. A long moment passed before he distinguished which was Obi-Wan's saber; he slid it off his belt and extended it on his outstretched palm to his former apprentice. There were ritual words to say, but they had long since fled his mind under the stress of the earlier ceremony, and to try to recreate them now seemed awkward and pointless. As Obi-Wan reached to take the saber from his hand, he said simply, "It is yours."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan replied.

His hand rested heavily on Qui-Gon's through the cool metal as their gazes locked. As the weight began to lift, Qui-Gon impulsively leaned forward and brushed a formal kiss across Obi-Wan's cheek. Twelve years before, he had kissed Obi-Wan's forehead paternally as he gave him the lightsaber he would bear in his apprenticeship; this was a kiss of equals, a symbol of his acceptance of his Padawan as an equal among the Jedi. He should have given it before the Council, after the severance of their training bond, when the formality of the moment would mask the emotions beneath. That, he suspected, was one of the foremost reasons to hold such ceremonies publicly.

He moved to touch his lips to Obi-Wan's other cheek, completing the gesture. As he bent his head again, Obi-Wan's eyes caught him again--briefly, but enough to distract him so that he did not notice the turning of Obi-Wan's face until his lips found themselves a resting place softer and more supple than Obi-Wan's cheek. He froze, warm breath ghosting through the hair of his beard, Obi-Wan's mouth seeming amazingly responsive without moving at all. Carefully, he drew away, banishing from his mind the knowledge of how easy it would be to taste his Padawan more deeply--and the knowledge that Obi-Wan might well permit it, in the haze of the moment.

Obi-Wan took a pace back as well, seeming to steady himself against the door jamb before bowing to Qui-Gon and hooking his lightsaber to his own belt. "Thank you, Master," he murmured, then stepped back out the door. It closed immediately in his wake, leaving Qui-Gon to a deeper puzzle.

Qui-Gon took a deep breath, then sank down again on his sleep couch. He had time for further meditation before dinner. And he had the distinct premonition that he would need it.

* * *

> <p> He did not need to ask what time to show up. He never did; no matter where or when they ate, he merely went to the proper place, and if Obi-Wan was not with him, he would already be there, waiting for him. So when he finished his meditations, he rose, tidied his appearance, and went out into the common area of their living quarters. <p>

As he had expected, the small table just outside the equally small kitchen stood laden with a full meal and as luxurious a setting as could be found anywhere in the Temple: cloth napkins, finely-detailed tableware that most definitely did not belong to them, and a small basket of glowstones that cast a light designed to make even the most humble meal--or dinner partner--seem exotic and appealing. Obi-Wan, already the most appealing of dinner partners, was just setting a last dish on the table, and looked up at Qui-Gon's arrival with a smile.

The smile was not the reason his stomach suddenly clenched, although it might have figured a close second. Too much, it was all too much. Obi-Wan was no longer his apprentice, was no longer his, and should certainly not be serving him anymore. This, all of this... it seemed a parody, and although he was not sure if it was a parody of what they had had before, or what he might futilely wish for them to have, it still mocked his present state of emotion. Serenity hung just barely within his grasp, mocking him in its own way with the threat

of vanishing entirely.

Obi-Wan, always sensitive to his Master's feelings, seemed not to notice anything amiss as he continued smiling and beckoned for Qui-Gon to join him. The bond remained quiescent for once, and Qui-Gon at once thanked and cursed the Force for its timing. He itched to discover the source of Obi-Wan's increasingly strange behavior, but such things worked two ways. The knowledge was not worth the price.

The repast, he noted as he sat, was as impressive a display as they could have wished for anywhere. Several of his and Obi-Wan's favorite dishes filled the limited space of the table, and if Qui-Gon knew that Obi-Wan could not possibly have cooked them all, his quick survey of the kitchen showed no tell-tale containers to spoil the effect. Obi-Wan shot him a conspiratorial glance, and to his surprise, he did not have to force his answering smile.

They sat in silence for a few moments, until Qui-Gon realized Obi-Wan was, as usual, waiting for him to make the first choice of food. Yet another way he would have to nudge their relationship into the new, correct channels. He motioned for Obi-Wan to proceed. "You no longer need defer to me, you know."

"I know." As he reached for a serving spoon, Obi-Wan's smile turned slightly abashed. "But it still seems like what I should do."

"That will change." He made no effort to hide the tinge of wistful amusement in his voice as he began to fill his own plate. "Soon you will wonder why you ever deferred to me at all."

"No." When Qui-Gon looked up again, Obi-Wan's eyes met his gravely. A trickle of sensation came through the bond, enough for him to feel the earnestness of the words. "That will never happen."

"You say that now." He kept his tone arch, to lighten the mood, despite the irrational twisting inside him that wanted to demand a pledge from Obi-Wan on the matter.

"I suppose things do change," Obi-Wan said. The somber downward curve of his mouth and the crease of his brow as he stared down at his plate made Qui-Gon regret having said anything at all. This was a happy occasion. Happy.

But Obi-Wan rebounded quickly, and their conversation turned to the inconsequential and impersonal. Politics, Temple rumors, jokes... Qui-Gon found himself only a little surprised by how easy it was to maneuver around anything that might cause tension or real emotion. Levity, and the illusion of happiness, were created easily enough between people who knew each other as well as they did. Between the looks and smiles they shared, he could almost imagine they shared an untainted joy. Yet he could not dismiss the weight on his own heart enough to relax completely, and when they finished eating, a less comfortable silence fell over them.

"When will you leave?" The question hung in the air before he realized he was asking it, but he refused to regret it. He had a right to know, and however much Obi-Wan wished to pretend nothing had changed between them, whatever his motivations might be, reality still remained for them to deal with in the end.

"When do I leave? For where?" Obi-Wan looked genuinely confused, and Qui-Gon once again wondered if Obi-Wan had given any thought at all to what might happen from one minute to the next. So like him to pick this day of all days to learn to live only the moment.

"When you leave here." He waved a hand to generally indicate their surroundings. "You're a Knight, now. You'll have your own quarters, your own missions."

"Of course." At odds with his earlier glory in his own independence, Obi-Wan only looked crestfallen behind his mask of impassivity. "And you'll need my room for Anakin."

Obi-Wan avoided his gaze for a long moment, and Qui-Gon could sense only an indistinct tumult of emotion through the bond. He himself had already dismissed Anakin from his conscious mind in favor of matters that seemed of more immediate importance, but it seemed the boy still weighed heavily in Obi-Wan's thoughts. "Is that what all of this is about?"

"All of what?" Obi-Wan's chin lifted almost imperceptibly, but it was enough to give him a wary look that irrationally sparked Qui-Gon's irritation.

"This. The dinner, the flirtation, your relentless attempts to pretend that nothing has changed, that everything is as it was. Or perhaps as you want it to be." He heard the snap in his own voice as though from a great distance, but made no attempt to ameliorate it. It felt too good to finally let loose his own frustration, to purge his feelings and let Obi-Wan deal with them.

Dealing with them seemed to involve Obi-Wan yet again staring at him as though Qui-Gon had struck him. "Is that what you think?"

"Is that not what it is?"

Obi-Wan stood up abruptly, kicking his chair back behind him and leaning over the table. "And what if it is? What harm can there be in giving me this one night to imagine that everything is still as it was? That I still have a home, that the one person I love is not so desperate to see me out the door he cannot even wait until my Knighting Day is over? Or can't you even pretend to love me that much?"

The punch of Obi-Wan's emotions through the damned bond hit him like a kick to his stomach. Love. Force, but what did Obi-Wan know of his love? "Obi-Wan--"

Before he could gather enough breath to articulate his chaotic thoughts, Obi-Wan turned away, drawing in hitching gasps of breath. He strode a few paces, then whirled back. He stood with his head bowed, his face and body trembling with his effort at whatever control he thought was expected of him. "Forgive me, Qui-Gon. I did not intend to behave so childish tonight. This is all my fault, but I do wish you well with Anakin, I do--"

"No."

"What?" Obi-Wan looked up sharply.

"Anakin will not be my Padawan. I will take no other." He had not intended to speak the last words, but he knew them to be true. If they would ease Obi-Wan's mind, let him know it, too.

"But--"

"Yoda will see that Anakin is trained." He took a deep, shuddering breath and met Obi-Wan's gaze steadily. "No one will take your place."

Obi-Wan nodded unevenly, his eyes still wild and his face flushed. He looked away and gave a small laugh. "I suppose I wore you out," he said, and Qui-Gon knew he had misunderstood. "I never meant to be a burden to you. I tried so hard not to be."

"You never were," he managed hoarsely. His heart pounded, and pounded harder when Obi-Wan caught the undertones in his voice and slowly lifted his eyes again to Qui-Gon's face. "That was not what I meant when I said there would be no one in your place."

They stared at each other in silence. The moment stretched for what seemed a very long time, but Qui-Gon could not move to break it. He waited.

"I think," Obi-Wan began, voice almost not trembling. He took a slow step forward, and hesitancy fell away to reveal a feline hunting grace in the roll of his hips. "I think perhaps I understand you now."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon whispered. Then he found his arms and mouth filled with the weight and taste of Obi-Wan, and he knew he was understood very well.

His eyes closed of their own accord as Obi-Wan's lips settled on his and probed softly, almost politely, until his own willing lips parted. His head soon spun from the gentle kisses and the solid heat resting over him. Every barrier inside him broke as Obi-Wan's mouth left him, and he surged forward to reclaim the moist, comforting contact. Obi-Wan tangled his fingers in the hair close to Qui-Gon's scalp, holding him still for the soft nips and tugs on his lips, each bit of gentle suction increasing the need for more.

A breathy moan was rising in his throat when Obi-Wan pulled back, gazing at him with unreadable eyes. They stayed, regarding each other curiously for a moment; then Obi-Wan was sliding off his lap and standing, leaving his legs tingling where Obi-Wan's weight had rested. Too dazed to protest, Qui-Gon watched as Obi-Wan calmly cleared the table, leaving the dishes in meticulous stacks in the kitchen before coming back to stand before Qui-Gon. "I think we can do this now," he said.

Qui-Gon nodded, with no pretense at misunderstanding, as Obi-Wan pulled his chair closer and straddled it. He reached out and stroked his fingers down Obi-Wan's cheek, the wordless gesture winning him a smile. Then Obi-Wan leaned forward and bent his head until their foreheads rested against each other. Qui-Gon's fingers slid around to cup the back of Obi-Wan's neck, and he sighed as he closed his eyes.

This time it was easy, so easy he wanted to laugh with mingled relief and despair. The frazzled ends of the training bond came undone at the merest touch of their wills, and the strands loosened and unraveled until the shriveling connection fell away and disintegrated entirely. An unwitting sob choked him as he grasped involuntarily for the bond one last time; then it altered swiftly into a moan of joy and wonder.

Obi-Wan was still there. In his arms, in his mind, radiating as much joy as Qui-Gon himself felt. "We're all right," Obi-Wan whispered in relief, and Qui-Gon nodded, eyes still closed.

He pulled Obi-Wan closer and marveled at the utter elation that filled him, his lingering doubts and griefs gone as though they had never existed. He felt younger and newer than he had in a very long time. He bent to Obi-Wan's eager lips again.

Extraordinarily resilient. Yes, they always had been.

END

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file.